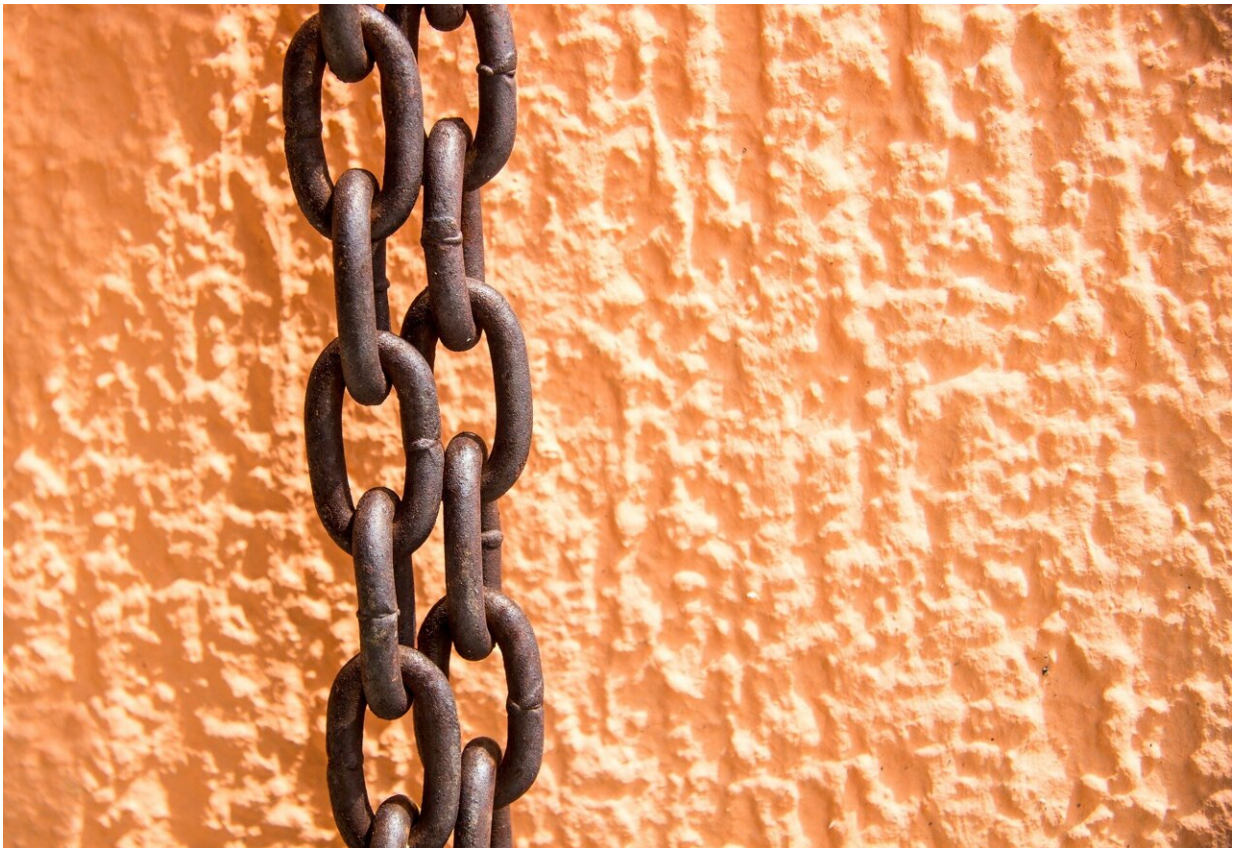


Workplace 'slavery' still embedded in supply chain, researcher says

November 13 2023, by Jon Niccum



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

A dozen years ago, the Foxconn City industrial park in China became infamous for a rash of worker suicides. Foxconn (a manufacturer of iPhones, among other notable products) initially responded by installing

safety netting around the facility so that employees were unable to hurl themselves from windows to their deaths effectively.

These incidents prompted investigations and policy changes to combat worker exploitation at this particular company, yet the international problem of exploited labor has continued to escalate.

"Like so many other things in the supply chain, the pandemic started bringing slavery to light," said Joe Walden, an associate teaching professor in analytics, information & operations management at the University of Kansas.

"People started asking more and more, 'Who and where am I buying this from?'"

In his new article ["Modern Day Slavery in Your Supply Chain."](#) Walden estimates the number of workers living in slavery conditions between 17-21 million worldwide. Although some countries have laws that prevent slave labor and/or require audits of their supply chains, he offers further recommendations to fix this global crisis. The article appears in *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*.

"I define 'slavery' in today's environment as being forced to work in a job that you either are coerced to work in, not paid to work in or held in an environment where you don't have a choice but to work in," he said.

Although China is a frequent offender, workplace slavery occurs the most in Europe, specifically Great Britain, Walden said.

"That's mainly because of the influx of so many immigrants where you can easily slide in indentured servants or slave labor without people noticing," he said.

"Part of it is driven by everybody wanting the lowest price. Well, obviously the lowest price is going to come from somebody not paying for labor."

While there is scant information on how prevalent such worker exploitation remains in the United States, Walden said it is a contributing—albeit camouflaged—component of the supply chain.

He said, "One of the problems is there are no regulations, laws or requirements to look past that first supplier."

Are American businesses morally obligated to investigate their supply chains?

"I think so—especially given our past," he said.

"We fought a war over slavery 160 years ago. With all the modern-day issues that keep bubbling up over the slavery issue, we owe it to ourselves. We need to say, 'I've checked my supply chain. We're good. My suppliers, my supplier's suppliers and my supplier's supplier's suppliers aren't involved.'"

Walden became interested in this issue when he witnessed new laws being introduced in the EU to combat slavery.

"I thought, 'If they're passing laws in Europe, how big is this issue really?' It's amazing to find out it's huge," said Walden, who noted that Gartner, one of the largest business research companies, recently shared [survey results](#) in which 70% of respondents "have no clue what's going on in their supply chain."

The professor was particularly shocked at how widespread [slavery](#) was within the manufacturing industry.

"I assumed that when looking for modern-day slave labor, I was going to find everything involving the sex trade," he said. "But probably three-fourths of what's going on is not in the sex trade. It's in the supply chain."

Raised in North Carolina, Walden spent 26 years in the U.S. Army, with an additional five more working as a contractor. There, he developed his expertise in warehousing and distribution, which included designing a 4.2 million-square-foot distribution center in Kuwait for Operation Iraqi Freedom. He retired as a colonel.

He's written extensively about the supply chain, including an article titled ["Bridging the Talent Gap. What is Being Done and What Needs to be Accomplished to Help Fill in or Eliminate the Supply Chain Management Talent Gap?"](#) for the *Journal of Supply Chain Management, Logistics and Procurement*.

"The most important thing is people must start looking at walking the process in their [supply chain](#). Unfortunately, what's happening now is most people are looking at their first level of suppliers ... and they're not looking any further than that. 'I don't care where you get it from as long as I get a good price and good quality. The other stuff is your problem,'" Walden said. "The reality is that it's actually everyone's problem."

More information: Joseph L. Walden, Modern Day Slavery in Your Supply Chain, *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* (2023). [DOI: 10.14738/assrj.109.15569](https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.109.15569)

Provided by University of Kansas

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